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**The Reception of Tacitus' *Germania* by the German
Humanists: from Provence to Empire**

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It is well known the German Humanists (1490-1540) used Tacitus' Germania to advance their notion of the German nation in response to Italian criticism. But less attention has been given to the German nature of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation (1509). I argue that Humanists after Conrad Celtis (Bebel, Wimpheling, Cochlaeus, Brant, Irenicus, Franck, Hutten) emphasized the Germanness of the empire by reinterpreting the traditional Translation of Empire, the Germanic migrations out of Germania after Constantine, and the designation of a new national purpose (the protection and expansion of the Church and the faith). They grafted the new views of the nation with the fifth world empire, Germany as the descendent of Roman-era Germania, and the contemporary Holy Roman Empire.

"Now that the Senate has declared France an empire, what title should I adopt? Emperor of France? No, since Louis XVI was the King of France and imagined the country to be his private property. Simply 'emperor'? But how is this different from the emperors of Russia and the Habsburg Empire? Roman Emperor? But the capital is Paris not Rome. Admittedly Roman symbols abound, with triumphal arches, allusions to Julius Caesar, imperial eagles, titles. When I visit the Rhine departments in September I will stop by Aachen and seek the advice of my ancestor, Charlemagne."

And so Napoleon set out for Aachen to find out what his prototypical sovereign thought his title should be. After ten days at the holy site he found the answer: Emperor of the French. It was the perfect solution,; it preserved a bond with the French people, while allowing for future expansion beyond France. The *Moniteur* expounded on this connection with the Emperor of the Romans. Indeed Napoleon as the Second Charlemagne used his (fake) regalia

during his coronation in Notre Dame on December 2, 1804. As it happened, the relationship between the (French) empire and the (French) nation would bedevil Napoleon, just as it did throughout the history of the Holy Roman Empire.

Napoleon must have known that the semi-official name of the Habsburg empire was the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. But he probably did not know *why* this awkward title was originally adopted. Although the empire had many names in the later Middle Ages, the German Humanists emphasized both nation and empire, making the imbalance between them even more evident.¹ They searched the Roman and Greek classics in their promotion of the German past. With the virtual exclusion of the pope in the emperor's coronation (not even required after 1509), Europe was left with only one claimant to universal authority, at least in temporal matters. Like Napoleon, the emperors attempted to reconcile their nationalism with the traditional universalism. If Napoleon had to harmonize Republican sensibilities with imperial aspirations, the German Humanists at the time of Emperor Maximilian I (1486-1519) felt compelled to make the German nation the effective equivalent of the Holy Roman Empire.²

While the German *patria* had been a commonplace since the time of Frederick Barbarossa, the German Lands as a nation was relatively rare.³ Common names for the German Lands were Alemannia, Teutonica, Tutschland, Deutschland, Germania, etc. While Germany was sometimes referred to as a nation, so too were the larger units which were included in the whole, such as that of the Swabians, originally one of the stem duchies. Technically the nation referred to a grouping, as in the nations of a medieval university, but it could be quite elastic in meaning. In the late fifteenth century many German Humanists decided it was time to modernize the idea of nation in a way that would meet the criticisms of the Italian Humanists.⁴

1 See Münkler and Grünberger, "Nationale Identität," 211-48, esp. 220-31.

2 A typical example is Johannes Trithemius (1462-1516) who often refers to the "German nation" in his historical genealogies of Maximilian I. See Ridé, *L'image du Germain*, vol. 1, 285-90.

3 See Whaley, *Germany and the Holy Roman Empire*, vol. 1, Chap. 4 (The Reich and the German Nation), 50-66; Garber, "Vom universalen," 16-37 at 24-32; Scales, *The Shaping of German Identity*, Chap. 6; Hirschi, *The Origins of Nationalism*, Chap. 7, esp. 167-79.

4 The Italian who angered the Germans most was Giannantonio Campano. See Freher and Struve, eds., *Rerum Germanicarum*, 292-300; Kelley, "Tacitus Noster," Chap. 8, 152-67; Nonn, "Heiliges Römisches Reich," 129-42.

In what sense was the empire “German”? How could the hereditary possessions of the emperor be part of the German nation? The German Humanists discovered the solution to resolve the ambiguous relationship between nation and empire in the *Germania* of Tacitus.⁵

It is argued here that the German Humanists after 1490 turned ancient Germania into a German empire, which, they claimed, had a continuous history since the early Roman empire. They made the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation at once German and imperial. The German Humanists used Tacitus’ *Germania* to construct a Germany as a Roman-era German empire, but with its own separate origins and a distinct destiny.⁶ They continued to refer to the new Germany as the Roman empire, as the Holy Roman Empire was sometimes called. Yet the essence of the modern empire was German. They wanted it both ways.

The current empire was fully imperial yet fully German. They imagined the contemporary empire as somehow German based, with its historical connection with Roman Germania Magna. Actually Upper and Lower Germany were considered Roman provinces, even though both straddled the Rhine. If Caesar Augustus really did think of Germania Magna as a province, that did not make it so. It was Quinctillius Varus’s task to turn it into a functional province, but the disaster at the Teutoburg Forest in 9 CE put an end to that. The fiction that the Rhine divided Gaul from Germania was invented by Julius Caesar.⁷ By giving this vast unconquered territory a name—Germania—it somehow *mirabile dictu* became a geographical and ethnographical entity. The Renaissance Humanists simply transformed this place called Germany into the heartland of an equally fictitious “empire,” which was both German (*deutsch*) and Germanic (*germanisch*).

5 See Wilson, *Heart of Europe*, Chap. 6 (Nation), 255-92; Isenmann, “Kaiser, Reich und deutsche Nation am Ausgang des 15. Jahrhunderts,” 145-246; Hirschi, “Vorwärts in neue Vergangenheiten,” 362-95 at 383-89; Scales, “Monarchy and German Identity,” 167-200; Moeglin, “Die historiographische Konstruktion der Nation,” 353-77 at 375-77 (German Model).

6 See Joachimsen, “Tacitus im deutschen Humanismus,” 697-717; Krapf, *Germanenmythos und Reichsideologie*, 39-45; Klopff, “Die Germania des Tacitus,” 93-114 at 99-114; Tiedemann, *Tacitus und das Nationalbewusstsein*; Ridé, *L’image*, vol. 1, Chap. 5, 261-405; Mertens, “Die Instrumentalisierung der ‘Germania’ des Tacitus,” 37-101 at 81-96.

7 See Krebs, *A Most Dangerous Book*, 44; Siegmund von Schnurbein, “Germanien in römischer Sicht: Germania Magna und die römischen Provinzbezeichnungen,” in Beck, *Zur Geschichte*, 25-36.

The interest in Tacitus did not begin with the Germans but with the Italians.⁸ Italian Humanists scurried about Europe looking for classical manuscripts, especially those about *Italia*. When Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini came across a copy of Tacitus' *Germania* in 1455, he used it to plead with the emperor Frederick III and the German princes to launch a crusade against the Turks, who had just taken Constantinople.⁹ While he praised the learning, piety, and material progress of modern Germans, he attributed these advances to the Catholic Church and not to the barbarous Germans of old.

The Great Debate had begun. Offended by this backhanded praise, the Germans had to reply. How can Tacitus be utilized to demonstrate the equality of Germans and today's Italians? Can the *Germania* of Tacitus' day be shown to be on a par with Rome, or at least possessing some redeeming qualities or accomplishments? If, as they claim, contemporary Italians are the direct descendants of the ancient Romans, are modern Germans the direct descendants of the ancient Germans? Are modern and ancient Germans really so barbarous as the Italian Humanists say? But whenever the Germans tried to counter the Italians, the latter cut them short with the embarrassing question: where are your sources? Where are the German writers and their histories of Germany for the past 1500 years? We Italians are enjoying a re-birth; you Germans were never born! In response, the German Humanists mounted a fourfold defense:

8 See Krebs, *Most Dangerous Book*, Chap. 2; Schellhase, *Tacitus in Renaissance Political Thought*, Chap. 1 (Italians), 2 (Celtis & Hutten), 3 (Germans); Krebs, *Negotiatio Germaniae*, Chap. 3, 111-90.

9 See Krebs, *Negotiatio Germaniae*, 127-56.

- 1) They searched classical texts for references to Germany and its people.
- 2) They constructed a compendium of Germany modeled on the *Italia Illustrata* (1474) of Flavio Biondo.
- 3) They collected vernacular writings from the Middle Ages about anything German.¹⁰
- 4) They created a positive image of the German aboriginals and linked it to contemporary *Germanen*, who would have to be portrayed as direct descendants of the ancient *Germani*. The histories of Germany and the Holy Roman Empire must be shown to be intertwined.

The German Humanists were also spurred on by the widespread resentment of papal appointments and Curial taxes in Germany.¹¹ The Italian Humanists presented the primitive Germans as uncouth, beer-guzzling idol worshipers, who sat around gambling and slugging each other.¹² The only thing they were good at was fighting in battle. At first the German Humanists simply ignored these negative characteristics in Tacitus' book, or tried to turn them into virtues.¹³

10 See Walshe, *Medieval German Literature*, Bk 3, Chap. 6; Borchardt, *German Antiquity*, Chap. 2.

11 See Strauss, *Manifestations of Discontent*, Chaps. 1, 2.

12 See Krebs, *Negotiatio*, 111-90. The Italian and German Humanists rarely questioned the historical accuracy of Tacitus. While such adulation of the classical texts may seem naive by modern standards, such was the general Renaissance attitude toward the ancients.

13 In particular the notion that the Germans' rustic life, mocked by G. Campano, was actually natural virtue, untainted by civilization. Tacitus himself suggests such a comparison. See Conrad Celtis in Forster, *Selections from Conrad Celtis*, 52: "Ita nos Italicus luxus corrumpit et saeve..., ut plane sanctius et beatius fuisset nos agere rudi illa et silvestri vita, dum inter continentiae fines vivebamus, quam tot gulae et luxus instrumenta, quibus nihil umquam satis est, invexisse peregrinosque mores induisse." Many of the patriotic notions of the later German Humanists appear in Celtis' *Oratio* (Forester, 36-65). The major components of the patriotic vision of the German Humanists—imperium, natio, Germanie, patria, studium, virtus, translatio—are contained in Celtis' speech. But these words are scattered randomly in this discourse and not assembled into a coherent pattern. Celtis does not develop these ideas in his other writings. Perhaps he had an implicit concept of a German empire, but that's about all. Too often modern historians point to the common elements of the patriotic sentiments in the writings of Bebel, Wimpfeling, Franck, Prickheimer, Brant, Irenicus, and Aventinus, without sufficient acknowledgment of their differences. But as I contend here, these authors go beyond the offhand allusions to nation and empire in the Oration of Celtis. Celtis challenged his followers to demonstrate how the empire of Maximilian I was a continuation of the "empire" of the Germans at the time of the Julio-Claudians.

Their lack of laws, cities, institutions, and buildings were actually expressions of their pristine goodness and natural simplicity. The first noble savages, if you will. The Humanists gathered classical allusions to place-names for cities, regions, and tribes, and *mutatis mutandis* associated them with modern equivalents. Thus the Roman Suevi became the contemporary Swabians. The name Suevi was itself interchangeable with the Alemanni, later a name for the Germans. The Roman Helvetii became the *Switzer*, *Schwyz*, or *Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft*.

But modern scholarship on the reception of Tacitus sometimes does not give enough attention to the external circumstances at the time of Emperor Maximilian I. The Humanists sharply criticize the German princes for pursuing their own interests, and not rallying to the emperor and the empire. It is imperative to unify the empire as a prelude for an assault on the infidel who is threatening Italy, Hungary, and the Balkans. The wars after 1490 involving Switzerland, Venice, Swabia, and the Netherlands could dismember the empire of the German Nation. Heinrich Bebel (1472-1518) wrote a series of tracts (1500-10) imploring the “German” Swiss to remain within the Holy Roman Empire and join in the coming crusade.¹⁴ He reminds the Swiss that they have an obligation to defend the emperor, empire, Christian faith and doctrine, pope, and their own *libertas*. Maximilian also needs the Swiss against the French in Italy. Bebel chastises the German princes for not assisting the emperor in suppressing the “rebellious” Venetians.¹⁵ While most German Humanists did

14 See Zinsmaier, ed. and trans., *Heinrich Bebel*, 148-69. The Swiss are part of “Germaniae nostrae sacroque imperio” and “vos ipsi imperii membrum, in ipsaque Germania nati et siti”; *Ad Bernenses*, 115-16. Cf. this with Bebel’s *Cohortatio ad Helvetios*, 148-69 at 150, and his *Epitome* (on the Swiss Wars), 88-135 at 88-96. A convenient online edition of these and related works is contained in CAMENA, taken from the Schardius edition. Bebel’s political writings are in the *Sequentia* (1509 ed.) in the B1 group, which includes his *Oratio* and *Germani sunt indigenae*. The CAMENA uses modern typeface. For Willibald Pirckheimer and the Swiss, see Bernstein, *German Humanism*, 98-105.

15 See two tracts against the Venetians in *Heinrich Bebel: Patriotische Schriften*, Chaps. 19 and 20; Flood, “Johannes Kurtz und ‘Madunna Venesia,’” 83-93.

not share Maximilian's enthusiasm for his Habsburg ancestry and his imperialist fantasies, they offered much mutual support, as can be seen in their presence in imperial cities and courts, even if no Humanist can be found in the emperor's inner circle of advisors; numerous Humanists were in Innsbruck and Vienna.

The center of Humanist studies, however, was not in the courts, but in the universities, where they gathered to form solidarities and pursue common interests.¹⁶ Most of the prominent Humanists were from the edges of the empire, such as Alsace. Somehow these scholars balanced their loyalty to their town or region, the German nation, and the Holy Roman Empire. Their corner of the empire was a microcosm of the greatness of the whole.

The Arch-Humanist Conrad Celtis (1459-1508) set the pattern for patriotic Humanism. In his inaugural address at the Bavarian University of Ingolstadt in 1492 he exhorts his audience to put the new learning at the service of the nation.¹⁷ German students should sift the ancient and medieval sources for information about Germany. To underscore the centrality of Tacitus he soon afterwards prepared an edition of the *Germania*.¹⁸ Celtis' electrifying speech at Ingolstadt focused on the Germans' common qualities. His main theme is that the Germans constitute a single *Volk*, itself divided into tribes. The first Germans, as "our Tacitus" assures us, were *indigenous*. Indeed they were the world's only unmixed ethnic group, then or since.¹⁹

16 See Overfield, "Germany," Chap. 6, 92-122 at 104-07.

17 Celtis' Oration is in Forster, *Selections from Conrad Celtis*, 96-111. See Krebs, *Negotiatio*, 190-210; Flood, "Conrad Celtis," 27-41; Ridé, *L'image*, vol. 1, 212-15; Spitz, *Conrad Celtis*, Chap. 10 (Patriot).

18 Although Celtis' projected *Germania illustrata*, modeled after Biondo's *Italia illustrata*, was never finished, many Humanists contributed to it. See Ridé, *L'image*, vol. 1, Chap. 4, 215-29; Joachimsen, *Geschichtsauffassung und Geschichtsschreibung in Deutschland unter dem Einfluss des Humanismus*, Chap. 6 (*Germania illustrata*).

19 See Müller, *Die 'Germania generalis' des Conrad Celtis*, Pt2, 303-66; Tacitus, *Germania*, Bk 1, part 2 (*Germanos indigenas*); Bk 1, par 4; Rives, trans., Tacitus: *Germania*, section 9, 66-74; Ridé, *L'image*, vol. 1, 228-59; Joachimsen, "Tacitus in deutschen Humanismus," 697-717 at 706-07 (Celtis); Silver, "Germanic Patriotism," 38-68 at 40-9.

They comprised a distinct geographical area, bounded by the Danube and the Rhine, an area approximately the size of the German nation of c.1500. The *Germanen* or *Deutschen* are the direct descendants of the *Germani* of which Tacitus writes so eloquently.

Needless to say, no historian in the twentieth-first century would concur with the assumptions of Celtis and the other Humanists. The residents of Germania Magna did not of course call themselves *Germani* or *Deutschen* or any other common name. They were Cherusci or Chatti and the like. Modern historians and archeologists emphasize the diversity of the peoples east of the Rhine, an area Rome never conquered.²⁰ The German Humanists by contrast hold up Tacitus' little book uncritically as literal fact.²¹ We modern Germans should look to our ancestors as our role models, especially in their practice of loyalty, freedom, and military prowess. As Tacitus and other Roman and Greek ethnographers testify, the Germans can trace their origins back to Noah, Tuisco, Hercules, and Adam, who spoke German. German-speakers escaped the Tower of Babel before God had confused the languages of the earth. Some ancient writers and Humanists included Alexander and the Trojans²² among the predecessors of the Germans but emphatically not the French. The Humanists had no qualms about incorporating medieval myths into their accounts of the historical Germans.

Clearly the superior culture of modern Germans was not the result of post-Roman conversion to Catholicism, as say the Italian Humanists. Rather, their outstanding achievements are the outcome of their exceptional virtue and talent. Did not a German invent gunpowder? The printing press? Who can match the artistic genius of Albrecht

20 See Pohl, *Die Germanen*, Chap. 3.

21 The bibliography is immense. See, e.g., Joachimsen, "Humanism and the Development of the German Mind," 162-224. The critical Beatus Rhenanus is a notable exception.

22 The German Humanists' treatment of the Trojan origin of the Germans is complex and often ambiguous. They were unsure how to reconcile Trojan ancestors with the German indigenous culture. They often rejected the French claim to Trojan origins, while allowing the Přemyslid and Habsburg dynasties to make similar claims. See Scales, *Shaping of German Identity*, 295-96, 316-17, 478; Borchardt, *German Antiquity*, 32, 46, 56-67, 191; Tanner, *The Last Descendant of Aeneas*, 98-115.

Dürer?²³ What Italian city can rival the beauty of Nürnberg²⁴ or Frankfurt? What French cathedral can surpass Cologne or Strasbourg? Who, save the Swiss, can stand up to the German imperial knights? Our great accomplishments followed naturally from the superiority of German moral character. No other empire has produced kings as distinguished as the Ottonians and the Staufer. Everyone knows that German virtue, now and in Roman times, vastly exceeds that of the decadent and effeminate Italians, the descendants of the pleasure-seeking and power-mad Romans.

Tacitus' *Germania* was what the Humanists were waiting for. At last here was proof that the progenitors of the Germans were community-minded, fearless warriors, and "natural." Unlike the ambitious sons of Romulus, they fought for honor (*Ehre*) alone. Blessed with autochthony they escaped the so-called civilized values of the oppressive Romans. The Humanists readily accepted Tacitus' description of the Germans as "unformed" (*informii*),²⁵ but insist that their historical formation was due to their inherent qualities, and not the result of the Christian faith brought by papal Rome. The key to German uniqueness is their indigenous character.

The Germans inhabit an area the Romans called *Germania*, now after 1500 more commonly referred to as Deutschland. The Humanists took their cue from Aeneas Sylvius, who described Germany in the wider context of Europe.²⁶ German geographers made detailed maps

23 See Cochlaeus, *Brevis Germanie Descriptio* (1512), Bk 4, par 30, 88.

24 See Cochlaeus, *Brevis Germanie*, Chap. 4, 74-93. "Norinberga centrum Europe simul atque Germanie" (p. 74). Cochlaeus' tribute to Nuremberg should not be taken as simply local patriotism. His praise of his home region serves as praises of Germany as a whole. Wimpfeling's attachment to his native Alsace serves much the same purpose.

25 Tacitus, *Germania*, I, 2, 266: *informem terris*. See O'Gorman, "No Place like Rome," 94-118; McLelland, "From Humanist History to Linguistic Theory," 89-109 at 90-4.

26 Now translated by Robert Brown: *Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, Europe (1400-1458)*, esp. Chaps 29-42.

of Germania, which were integrated with descriptions of regions, towns, plants, rivers, mountains, and climate. John Cochlaeus²⁷ and Jacob Wimpheling²⁸ extol German writers, artists, inventors, and architects. As good Humanists, they frequently cite ancient geographers, such as Ptolemy and Strabo. They display a strong attachment to their locality when discussing Germany. In his survey of Germania Sebastian Brant focuses on his home Strasbourg.²⁹ Another Alsatian, Jacob Wimpheling, likewise places Strasbourg in the center of his treatment of Germany.³⁰ Felix Fabri does much the same to his beloved Ulm in Swabia, described in detail.³¹ Numerous other examples could be cited.³² For the German geographers and topographers, ancient and modern Germany was a geographical entity, with physical boundaries, however imprecise and unstable, making it separate from the Roman empire.

Part of their motivation for making these historical ties with place names, past and present, was to counter the Italian Humanists, such as Flavio Biondo, who lamented the loss of Italy's names of regions and towns.³³ The early German Humanists were exasperated by the Italians' needling of the Germans for having so few of their

27 See Samuel-Scheyder, *Johannes Cochlaeus*, Chap. 2; for Cochlaeus' idea of the borders of Germany, see 265-66; genius of the Germans, 266-68. For Cochlaeus and Tacitus' Germania, see Langosch, "Zur Germania des Johannes Cochlaeus," 373-84, esp. 374-79.

28 *Epitome rerum Germanicarum Iacobi Wimphelingi* (1562), Chaps. 64-7.

29 See Varrentrapp, "Sebastian Brants," 288-308. In his *Ship of Fools* (1494) Brant (1457-1521) laments the decline of the faith and the rise of the Turks. Only Maximilian can reunify the empire and prevent the German Nation from furthering its own destruction; trans. Edwin Zeydel, *The Ship of Fools*, Chap. 99, 315-22.

30 See in particular his *Germaniae Jacobi Wimpheling: ad Rempublicam Argentinensem* (Strassburg, 1501); trans. Ernst Martin, *Germania von Jacob Wimpheling*, 82-5.

31 Fabri, *Descriptio Sueviae*, partially edited in Escher, *Quellen zur Schweizer Geschichte*, 107-229. As with many German geographers, Fabri adopts *Aeneas Sylvius' Europe* as his literary model.

32 See Gerald Strauss, *Sixteenth-Century Germany*, Chap. 4; Helmrath, "Probleme und Formen," 333-92 at 383-91. For the ties to Aeneas Sylvius, Biondo, and Celtis, see Ch. 1.

33 See Strauss, *Sixteenth-Century Germany*, Chap. 2. Biondo's integration of famous figures, classical literature and history, medieval history, topography and geography was a methodology quickly adopted by German Humanists, in part because it allowed them to avoid having to justify the relative lack of German sources. Biondo's portrayal of Italy—which was politically divided—inspired Germans to depict their own country as diverse yet somehow one. See Castner, *Flavio Biondo's Italia Illustrata*, 2 vols.

own historical writings, and the relative neglect of Germany in the classical sources. They gleefully point to Aeneas Sylvius' *Germania* as evidence of the feasibility of their approach to the study of pre-modern Germany.

But in view of the immense variety—political, topographical, geographical, cultural, linguistic—of Germany, ancient and modern, can Germany be called a “nation”? Much of the modern historiography of this question of nationhood in the German Humanists emphasizes the characteristics which the Humanist writings have in common, starting with Conrad Celtis. It is generally accepted that the Humanists often refer to the Holy Roman Empire, or at least the German-speaking core, as a nation. (Even during the Protestant Reformation both the Catholic south and the Protestant north continue to speak of the German nation, and criticize each other for disrupting its unity.) It is generally accepted that the late medieval idea of the common allegiance to the emperor constitutes a major ingredient of the German nation, in addition to its basis in language and culture.

There was not, to be sure, a consensus about what made up the physical boundaries of the German Lands, although it is significant that the Humanists devote an inordinate amount of attention to this subject. The Roman term *Germania* was still widely used, now even more so because of its association with Tacitus and other Roman sources. But after 1500 the word slowly gives way to *Deutschland*, with its more patriotic and linguistic connotations.

It was not unusual during the period of Maximilian's interminable Reichstags (27!) to raise money for the entire empire (with its extended Habsburg possessions), which was somehow considered the German *natio*. In this sense we can designate the German Humanists as patriots or even nationalists. But the limitation of this empire-as-nation paradigm is that the idea of the Germanness of the nation could understate the German character of the *imperium*. The Holy Roman Empire, after all, has traditionally, since at least the eleventh century, been associated with the universalist side of the

Habsburg empire, with its origins, however tenuous, in the ancient Roman empire. This generalization, however, oversimplifies both the *translatio imperii* and the meaning (as understood by the German Humanists) of the German migrations out of *Germania Magna*.

In point of fact the Humanists' interpretations sometimes distinguish between the nation and the empire insofar as both are German. The process of the German character of the *imperium* underwent three stages in their writing:

1) Germany is a distinct area, inhabited by people who speak German as their first language. The Humanists' obsession with geography began immediately after Conrad Celtis, who expressed some interest in it. Many of the older names for Germany continued on into the fifteenth century, such as Germania, Alemmania, Teutonia, Saxony (as the original German tribe), Duitsland, and many others in the languages of Europe. The empire was often referred as a *regnum*, even if other kingdoms, marches, and duchies fell within the German Lands. The Humanists are keen to indicate the continuity between Roman Greater Germany and the contemporary German nation. The gradual evolution of a German nucleus accelerated in the early fourteenth century, as in the works of Lupold of Bebenburg, who was widely read in the late fifteenth century.³⁴

Celtis assures his German audience that "our nation"³⁵ of Germany was the equal of the Roman empire in the virtue of its peoples. Ancient Germany had clear boundaries and its own language.

34 See Klippel, *Die Aufnahme der Schriften Lupolds von Bebenburg im deutschen Humanismus*. Not available in USA, but the University will loan a microfilm. The reason for Lupold's appeal to the Humanists was his idea that Germany formed the basis of the empire that also included the "additions" of Italy and Burgundy, a then radical notion which angered more traditional universalists such as William of Ockham. See Lupold von Bebenburg, *De iuribus regni et imperii*, 28, 32, 40-6, 50-68, 96-100, 202-04, 226-28, 256-62. Lupold's Fatherland (patrie Germanie, 278) might have surprised his readers in 1340 when it was written, but the patria was a commonplace in German Humanism.

35 Forster, *Selections from Conrad Celtis*, 46, line 42: pudeat, nationi nostrae iugum.

And the peoples of the east who are so unfortunate to have been “separated from the body of Germany,”³⁶ still admire our culture and language. So too the Franks to the west appreciate and enjoy something of the virtue and culture of the Germans. Only in the south, that is, Italy, do the former Romans remain mired in luxury and comfort, content only to seek commercial ventures. The Germans are the “last survivors of the Roman empire.”³⁷ Celtis implies that the current geographical area is only a part of the original Germany at the time of and shortly after the Romans. He implores modern Germans to restore Germany’s “broken territories.”³⁸ Yet Celtis never unequivocally equates the modern Holy Roman Empire with the nation of Germany.

Although Celtis at times comes close to a concept of the contemporary empire as German, his view of the Translation of Empire is essentially medieval. “Our empire” almost always means the present Holy Roman Empire. Charlemagne transferred the Roman empire to the Germans, who are the heirs of *Romanitas*. To be sure, modern Germans are at least the equal, and in many things superior, to the Romans and their present day descendants in Italy. The Arch-Humanist’s veneration of all things classical will not allow him to go further. The Roman empire may have been translated to the Germans, but the Roman empire to the south and west remains independent of the Holy Roman Empire. In some vague sense Celtis’ nation of Germany exists within the empire of Maximilian I. If pressed, Celtis would probably admit that the Roman empire was the greatest of the previous world empires, but the current Holy Roman Empire has far surpassed its barbarous origins and is well poised to exceed the ancient Roman *imperium* in its achievements.

36 *Conrad Celtis*, 46, line 44: quasi a corpore Germaniae nostrae separatae vivunt.

37 *Conrad Celtis*, 46, line 49: Germanos, Romani reliquias imperii.

38 *Conrad Celtis*, 46, line 42.

For our purposes, the most important element in Celtis' pre-imperial conception of ancient Germania is his mention of the tribes who *left* Germania Magna after the time of Constantine.³⁹ The image of Germans migrating out of ancient Germany, if only implied, became a commonplace for the Humanists after Celtis. The Arch-Humanist was unable to conceive these pre-Carolingian migrations as an empire because of his acceptance of the received tradition of the *translatio imperii* from the Greeks (Byzantines) to the Franks at the time of Charlemagne (or Otto I or other claimants).⁴⁰ The medieval views of the Translation were in fact undergoing changes in the German Humanists.⁴¹ For Celtis the Translation had primarily cultural not political implications, for it put the burden on modern Germans to utilize and even surpass the literature of the ancients.⁴²

For all Celtis' patriotism, we should be careful not to read history backwards and project the later views of Humanists such as Bebel and Cochlaeus into his exhortation to take up pens in the service of the nation. (One wonders whether the early German Humanists were more interested in the *translatio studii*, arrogantly claimed by the French since the thirteenth century, than the *translatio imperii*, which even the French had grudgingly acceded to the Germans since at least the time of King St Louis.) Celtis' Oration is more of a rough sketch than a finished portrait. It is a staccato of ideas about Germany and its future; a series of discussion points, not a battle plan. Negatively he responded to the insults of his Italian counterparts. Positively he prodded Maximilian and the princes to restore—and outdo—the Holy Roman Empire to its pristine glory.

39 Conrad Celtis, 42-47.

40 Conrad Celtis, 42-43.

41 There are surprisingly few studies on the Translation in the German Renaissance. See Goetz, *Translatio*, 199-213, 237-56; Scales, *Shaping of German Identity*, 278-89; Hirschi, "Konzepte von Fortschritt und Niedergang im Humanismus," 37-55 at 47-52.

42 Conrad Celtis, 42-43. Entirely different is the political emphasis put on the *translatio imperii* by Bebel, Wimpheling, Irenicus, Franck, and others. In the present article I limit my examples to just a few of the leading Humanists to illustrate the theme of empire. Many examples could be taken from other German Humanists during 1500-40.

2) Germany is a *nation*. The concept of the nation was widespread in the German later Middle Ages, and was referred to in a variety of ways. The language-rooted word could suggest a place where Germans or German subgroups, such as Saxons or Swabians, resided. Germany could be thought of as a collection of nations, or as a single nation.⁴³ Going back at least to the Ottonians there was always an intuition that some kind of cultural bond united the traditional stem duchies, a sentiment which was strongly felt in the early fourteenth century. For the Humanists the term nation was fast becoming a geographical concept in addition to being an ethnic one.

3) While there is nothing unusual about the Humanists' appeal to *natio* as a synonym for Germany or even implicitly the Holy Roman Empire, the very frequency of the allusions to the idea is striking. Nor was it unusual to tie loyalty to the emperor as an expression of devotion to the German nation. Probably some Humanists at the court of Maximilian approved the new title of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation adopted by the Diet of Cologne in 1512 (first used in 1474; the Holy Roman Empire first appears in 1254). The use of the German Nation would be consistent with their (we assume) support of the reform proposals of the Diet of Worms in 1495⁴⁴, at least those that the emperor

43 See above, notes 1 and 5; Schröcker, *Die Deutsche Nation*, Chap. 4; Münkler, "Tacitus' Bedeutung für das Nationalbewusstsein der Deutschen und der Niederländer," 71-77.

44 On the Worms Diet and the German nation see Schmidt, *Geschichte des alten Reiches*. Chaps. 1, 2; Wiesflecker, *Maximilian I*, 255-79 and *Kaiser Maximilian*, vol. 2, Pt 3; Brady, *German Histories*, Pt 1, Chap. 7. The bibliography on the Worms Diet is large.

himself favored. His aim was to obtain funds for his Italian wars—occasioned by the French invasion of 1494—without agreeing to share power with the German princes. What was unusual about the Humanists' summons of the nation was their emphasis on the obligation to serve their Fatherland—*patria* is often used by the Humanists—not merely by their humanistic studies but by military action and financial assistance. For Bebel, Germans should don military uniforms as well as (figuratively) togas, as Petrarch was wont to do.⁴⁵ The *patria* is on the battlefield as well as in the library.

Needless to say, the Humanists did not have any concept of a country called Germany within the empire; the nation state would have to wait until the nineteenth century. But even during the Lutheran Reformation the term nation became intertwined with the empire itself, just as the German Lands could be quite flexible in the late Middle Ages.

The main significance of the second stage of the German Humanists' heightened patriotism, however, was the movement towards a common purpose: *the defense of the Christian faith*. The nation is the rallying cry to mount an empire-wide crusade to oust the infidel from Europe, especially in Hungary. The Humanists often make historical allusions to the mission of the German nation to protect Christendom and the church, including the Roman church. They utilize the standard chronicles—especially Godfrey of Viterbo, Jordanes, Sigebert of Gembloux, Martin of Troppau (Opava), Otto of Freising—to emphasize the traditional German resistance to the threat from the east. (The preference for historical chronicles over legal texts dates mainly from the early fourteenth century.) The

45 Roman/German emperors and now Maximilian have often led wars against infidels and rebels. See Zinsmaier, *Heinrich Bebel*: "Oratio ad regem Maximilianum," 8-63 at 50-61. Bebel's Oration is partially translated in Strauss, *Manifestations of Discontent*, 64-72. Oratio also in Schardius, *Rerum Germanicarum*, vol. 1, 95-104. See Classen, *Zu Heinrich Bebel*, 63-8. For Irenicus' ideas about the Germans compared with other Humanists, esp. Cochlaeus, see Cordes, *Die Quellen der Exegesis*, Chaps. 5 and 6.

German crusade would unify the empire and restore the venerable mission of all Germans. While this commitment to the Christian enterprise is barely noticeable in Celtis, it is paramount in Bebel,⁴⁶ Wimpfeling,⁴⁷ Irenicus,⁴⁸ Cochlaeus,⁴⁹ Hutten,⁵⁰ and others.

The third phase of the Humanists' patriotic fervor is their notion of a German *empire*. If the idea of the German empire is implicit in Celtis and *a fortiori* in Bebel, it is explicit in Jacob Wimpfeling (1450-1528).⁵¹ A native of Alsace he stressed the centrality of the

46 Bebel, "Oratio," pars. 42-9, 50-7; "Quod imperator Romanorum" in *Patriotische Schriften*, 172-79, and "Ad Bernenses," 150-69 (our sacred empire of Germany will become more united as a result of the coming crusade; 150). Germany and the nation are our "mother,"; see Mertens, "Bebelius ...patriam Sueviam...restituit," 145-73 at 148; Grimm, "Bebel," 685-6. While there are many on-demand editions with the *Oratio* 1504 ed.—along with other works of Bebel—the Zinsmaier ed. uses modern typeset. The Very Christian Emperor Maximilian is the latest of German emperors who defended the faith and the Roman church. The exceptional virtue of the Germans is acknowledged by the Translation and by the title of their emperor. The kingdom of the eastern Franks became the German empire and nation. See "Imperator Romanorum iure," ed. Schardius, *Rerum Germanicarum*, vol. 1, 116-17.

47 Wimpfeling, *Epitome rerum Germanicarum* (1562), Chaps. 61-3, 66-8. His model city, Strasbourg (he was actually from Schlettstadt), testifies to the Christian faith of Germans. See his *Germania*, 80-180 at 146-50 with facing German. See Martin, *Germania von Jacob Wimpfeling* with appendix on Wimpfeling's sources, 87-93. Both *Germania* (1501) and *Epitome* (1505) are fiercely patriotic, with a focus on his native Alsace.

48 No people has ever surpassed the Christian faith of the Germans. Franciscus Irenicus, *Germaniae exegeseos* (1518) (digitized Google Books), Bk 2, Chaps. 10-12, 30r-31r; this faith is associated with the king's triple crown and the Translation of Empire; Bk 3, Chaps. 36-8, 68r-69r. See Ridé, *L'image*, vol. 1, 352-58.

49 Langosch, *Johannes Cochlaeus*, Chap. 3, par. 1, 62; Chap. 7, par. 25, 134; against heresy; Chap. 6, pars. 6 and 10, 112-14.

50 Hutten made extensive pleas to Maximilian and the princes to defend Germany and Christian Europe from the infidel. He often refers to the empire as both *Germania* and nation. See, e.g., Böcking, *Ulrichi Hutteni Opera* 5, 176-82 at 176.

51 Maximilian is the latest in the succession of emperors starting from Julius Caesar. They have been either Latin, Greek, or German, but never French. The empire was translated to the Germans, in the person of Charlemagne who was German, born in Ingelheim or Lüttich; *Germania* (ed. Borries), Bk 1, 98: "Legatur catalogus Romanorum regum, nempe aut Latinos aut Graecos aut Germanos in eo inveniimus, sed Gallum heminem, nisi et idem ortu et origine paternoque sanguine fuerit Germanus." The eastern part of the empire is *Germania*; 100. The Roman empire was translated from the Greeks to the Germans in the person of Charlemagne, "in Germanos translatus est imperium et primum in Caroli Magni personam, Carolus ergo Magnus Germanus fuit," 102; Martin, *Germania*, 39-43. Charlemagne is of German descent and rules the regions of Saxony, Bavaria, and Austria down to today; 108.

Translation of Empire to Charlemagne,⁵² who rules the regions of Saxony, Bavaria, and Austria down to today.⁵³ The Germany of the eastern Franks (Frankish Germans) traces its origins back to Tacitus. Following Irenicus and the medieval tradition, Wimpeling acknowledges Pope Gregory V's gift of the principle of election at the time of Otto III. The German electors effectively make the emperor of the Germans (the actual title was king of the Romans, adopted at Frankfort), although he received the title emperor of the Romans at the time of the translation of empire to Charlemagne.⁵⁴ The core of the empire was always Germany, a distinct nation.⁵⁵ Wimpeling insists that Alsace was always part of Germania. The implication of this discussion of Translation and Ottonian Germany is to assure his readers that Maximilian's wars in Italy are not "foreign wars," as say the German princes, but part of the normal course of German history going back to Charlemagne and the Ottonians.

52 The empire was translated from the Greeks to the Germans in the person of Charlemagne, a German. Wimpeling: *Germania*, Bk 1, 98: Also 102. The eastern part of the empire is Germania; 100.

53 *Germania*, 108. See Martin, *Germania*, 39-43.

54 Wimpeling, *Epitome*, Chaps. 10, 20, 21. This jumbled account of the translatio imperii, the papal gift of princely election, the continued expansion of the empire after Charlemagne, and the uniquely German institution of the election of the emperor is not always easy to follow. But the point is clear: the king or emperor of the Romans is also the emperor of the Germans who rules in Germania. Charlemagne's Germany goes back to Roman-era Germania but now absorbs the title of the Roman emperor. "Solis Germanis licere Principem eliger, qui Caesar et Romanorum Rex appellatus, ... Neque hanc electionis auctoritatem ab Electoribus deinceps Romanus Pontifex admire potest. Quis enim dedit Populo Romano Imperatoris eligendi potestatem, nisi ius divinum et naturale?" (Chap. 20, 18r); the Roman people here means the German princes. With the Ottonians the German nucleus predominates in the empire, which is now uniquely German by the new institution of the election by the princes, who represent all of Germany. Today Maximilian (*Epitome*, Chap. 10, 10v) continues to rule the German empire in the tradition of Charlemagne and as a Christian imperium.

55 *Epitome*, Chap. 7, 9r (nationem Germanicam), Chap. 22, 20r (ad nationem Germanicarum).

Franciscus Irenicus (1494-1553)⁵⁶ makes Charlemagne the king and emperor of Germany and the Germans. The Roman empire was translated to the Germany of the Germans. Johannes Aventinus (1477-1534)⁵⁷ was closely tied to the court of the William IV, Duke of Bavaria, who commissioned him to write his *Annals of Bavaria*. This seven-volume work is an outstanding example of how regional history and German patriotism were integrated. The work often depicts how emperor and pope worked in unison for the Christian good. A devout but unconventional Catholic, Aventinus rendered the German empire a continuation of German kings and emperors throughout history, extending back to Noah and Tuitsch, as listed in his *Chronik*, his condensed German version of the *Annals*. Germania is the latest in the series of world empires, and the greatest.⁵⁸

56 The pope transferred the imperium to the German Charlemagne, who rules Germania; Irenicus, *Germania* (1518), Bk 3, Chap. 19, 64v. The empire passed to Charlemagne and the Germans because they merited it by their exceptional virtue; Chap. 21, 66r. Charlemagne subdued all of Germany; Chap 32, 66v. Germania, eastern Francia which was not part of the Roman empire, consists of Saxony, Bavaria, Swabia, and Thuringia; 66v. “Germania tota Caroli Magni ipse Francie orientalis nomen accepit;” 66v. The empire was translated to the existing imperium which is called Germania. After Charlemagne Germania expanded in all directions. Christ gave the German emperors the temporal sword to rule the empire. “Nunc de imperii dilatione nostrae erit oratio, ut agnoscamus quanta Germani possideant, omnes autem provinciae imperio subiiciunter;” 67v. Otto I and Rudolf of Habsburg continued to expand into Burgundy and Austria; 68r. The emperor rules the Christian empire as is evidenced by his triple crowning at Aachen, Milan, and Rome; 66v. Irenicus affirms that Charlemagne and his successors rule the German empire. The popes have acknowledged that the Germans deserve their empire by reason of their exemplary virtue; 68v. Leo crowned Charlemagne at the request of the Roman people. After the translation of the empire to the Germans, the rulers are now called kings of the Germans. Irenicus seems to suggest that the kings are also emperors of the Germans after they are elected by the German princes, beginning with Otto III; 69r. (The late medieval procedure of the princely election of the king of the Romans to be followed by the crowning at Cologne and the papal coronation as emperor in Rome was not clarified until the 13th C.) There is no modern edition of Irenicus’ *Germania* that I know of. Many reproductions online and on-demand digitized.

57 Johannes Aventinus recounts the history of Germany from the perspective of Bavaria. The Germans conquered the Roman empire and gradually developed their own distinct culture and language. As the latest imperium in the history of world empires, Germania is far superior to its Roman predecessor. See Strauss, *Historian in an Age of Crisis*, 102-55.

58 Aventinus’ *Annals* run to 1460 (published 1554, 1580, 1881-86). His works available in Bayerische Landesbibliothek Online. See Leidinger, “Aventinus,” 469-70.

The Bavarian Sebastian Franck (1499-1553)⁵⁹ emphasizes the Germanness of Charlemagne, which *ipso facto* makes the empire German. After the Translation of the empire to the Germans, the rulers are now called kings of the Germans, and emperors of the Germans after they are elected by the German princes, beginning with Otto III.⁶⁰

For Irenicus the pope transferred the *imperium* to the German Charlemagne, who ruled Germania.⁶¹ The empire passed to Charlemagne and the Germans because they merited it by their exceptional virtue.⁶² Charlemagne subdued all of Germany, which was eastern Francia and outside the Roman empire.⁶³

Modern scholars often dismiss the German Humanists' portrayal of a "Germanic" takeover over much of Europe following

59 Although a Lutheran sympathizer, Sebastian Franck usually thinks of Germany as the entire empire. Yet his *Chronicle of Germany* (1538) was often seen as overtly Lutheran. He views the *translatio imperii* as the empire passing to the Germans in Germany (Deutschen in Germaniam); *Germaniae Chronicon*, 81r. After Charlemagne the empire of the Germans continued to expand. Charlemagne and his empire were German. He extended the empire into Italy, Hungary, Gaul, Austria, Burgundy, and beyond; 81v-86v. Aventinus cites extensively from Lupold, Godfrey of Viterbo, Irenicus, Wimpfeling, and Otto of Freising.

60 *Chronicle of Germany*, 69r. The idea that the German King of the Romans is elected by German princes becomes a mark of German identity quickly after 1300. That German Humanists would seize upon this tradition indicates that for them the empire was German. See Scales, *Shaping of German Identity*, 272-78.

61 Irenicus, *Germania* (1518), Bk 3, Chap. 19, 64v. He was born in Ettlingen in Swabia, part of the ancient Roman Germania Superior. On the surface his *Germania* is little more than a compendium of narrative sources, both ancient (Tacitus, Strabo, etc.) and medieval (especially Otto of Freising, Lupold, Martin of Troppau, Godfrey of Viterbo, Siegbert of Gembloux). A better title would be: "A History of the West since the Romans from a German perspective." No part of Europe has been untouched by the Germans!

62 Irenicus, *Germania*, 3.19.66r.

63 Irenicus, *Germania*, 3.32.66v. Germany consists of Saxony, Bavaria, Swabia, and Thuringia (66v). "Germania tota Caroli Magni ipse Francie orientalis nomen accepit;" 66v. The empire was translated to Germania. After Charlemagne Germania expanded in all directions. Christ gave the German emperors the temporal sword to rule the empire; 67v. Otto I and Rudolf of Habsburg continued to expand into Burgundy and Austria; 68r. The emperor rules the Christian empire, and his successors rule the German empire. The popes have recognized that the Germans deserve their empire by their superior virtue; 68v. Leo crowned Charlemagne at the request of the Roman people—implying that the Roman empire passed to the German empire.

Constantine as fanciful boasting,⁶⁴ a support for Habsburg claims to certain territories (such as the Burgundian inheritance and Milan), an allusion to Germany's glorious past, a historical argument for their claims to universal empire (giving it *de iure* jurisdiction over France) and universal reach to protect the Christian church and faith, and an increase in their reputation for *furor teutonicus*. And historians often assume that the expansion of Germany as an "empire" began with Charlemagne (or the Ottonians, depending on the German author). No Humanist advocated a return to the alleged "conquest" of the Roman empire by the German tribes.

While the general truth of this conventional view of the Humanists' perception of the Germanic migrations (or invasions, depending on one's viewpoint) cannot be denied, it omits a deeper dimension: the German authors did *not* see contemporary *Deutschen* as simply and entirely the heirs of the Roman empire. The key to the German Humanists' vision of the German empire is the direct continuation of the original Germans down to modern times. Their originality was to draw the inference of this direct descent for the history of the German *imperium*. Germania Magna was an empire and has always been an empire! Does this mean the Roman empire was never transferred to the Germans? No, it simply means that the translation(s) was more an acknowledgment than a legal transfer.⁶⁵

64 See Irenicus, *Germania*, Bk 3, Chaps. 1-33; Bebel, *Oratio*, pars. 1-50, 26-56, and *Germani sunt indigenae*, 66-85; Celtis, *Oratio*, 42-57; Wempheling, *Epitome*, Chaps. 7-18, and *Germania*, Bk 1.; Willibald Pirckheimer (1470-1530) describes the many tribes that left "our Germany" and entered the Roman empire. He traces the names of the regions and cities that continue down to his day; Pirckheimer, *Germaniae ex variis scriptores brevis explicatio*, ed. Schardius, *Rerum Germanicarum*, vol. 1, 81-94. Perhaps no Habsburg emperor has ever surpassed Maximilian I in his visual and literary propaganda promoting his Roman, Trojan, German, Habsburg, Christian, and classical ancestry in his claims to Germany, the Holy Roman Empire, Christendom, and indeed the world! See Silver, *Marketing Maximilian*.

65 On the Translation of empire, see Wempheling, *Epitome*, Chaps. 9, 10; Celtis, *Oratio*, pars 15, 43, 47; Bebel, *Oratio*, par. 49, 56; Franck, *Germania*, 81r; Cochlaeus, *Brevis Germanie*, par 14, 58; Ridé, *L'image*, vol. 1, 29-78.

The Humanists see the Translation more in moral than in legal terms. They exploit the ambiguity inherent in the classical word *imperium*, which can mean authority, command, or governance, in addition to the more general sense of a land empire, the meaning widely used since the late first century.⁶⁶ In short, the German empire was and is an *alternative* Roman empire! Germania may have been the inheritor of the Roman empire, as Celtis had said, but it was much more!

In his oration (1501) before Maximilian I at the court in Innsbruck, Heinrich Bebel (1472-1518) bragged that the German tribes left Germany in multiple waves and “conquered”—having never been conquered themselves—the Roman empire. The Lombards, Vandals, Angles, Saxons, Franks, Goths, and others easily overran the self-indulgent Romans. In some instances the names of the tribes were changed, but sometimes they remained the same.⁶⁷ The German occupation was an empire in everything but the name. (Of course they had no written language to express their self-perception.) Thus the transfer of the empire to the Germans in 800 or 962 was less a genuine transfer than a recognition of the German areas which were held by the *Germani* long before the coronation of Charlemagne. The crowning and anointing were actually the divine acknowledgment of a *fait accompli*. The German emperors themselves stood in a direct line of the Roman emperors dating back to Julius Caesar.⁶⁸ The Humanists’ flexible rendition of what constitutes “German” or Germanic permits the inclusion of King Arthur, King Theodoric, and Godfrey of Bouillon (prototype crusader) among the ancestors

66 See Richardson, *The Language of Empire*, Chap. 4.

67 Bebel, *Oratio*, pars 18-40, 26-49. *Germani sunt indigenae*, 66-85. The *Oratio* is also contained in online CAMINA, which uses modern typeface and contains Bebel’s *Sequentia*, the political writings (in the B1 group, e2b-ala-e2a). Also in digitalized Google Haithi Trust, and several Books on Demand.

68 Bebel, *Oratio*, 42-63;

of the Habsburg emperors.⁶⁹ For the Germanic emperors after Constantine the Christian mission is predominant.⁷⁰ It goes without saying that the pope does not confer constitutional power of any kind on German kings or emperors.

But is not this quaint notion of a German hegemony in Europe somewhat far-fetched? Who could possibly believe in c. 1500 that France, Italy, Spain, and England were parts of the Holy Roman Empire? Bebel's purpose in constructing this Germanic empire is partly rhetorical, partly political. It is rhetorical because it is a reply to those Italian Humanists who like to contrast the "disappearance" (and unrecorded) of Roman-era Germania with the clearly documented continuation of Italy and its classical culture down to modern times. (Many of the German Humanists who made the obligatory trek—like French painters in the seventeenth century—to Italy were angered by this Italian mockery of the supposed boors north of the Alps.) Biondo wrote his *Italia Illustrata* to remind his countrymen of their splendid past, and to chastise the barbarians (read: Germans) for destroying much of Roman civilization. With the barbarians, "the cultivation of literature came to a standstill."⁷¹ He is proud that the Italians have continued to extend the march of Roman culture to present Italy. You have it backwards, retorts Bebel! We conquered *you!* *Your* decrepit empire ended with Pope Leo's translation of the Roman empire to the Germans, who in fact never lost their "empire!" Nay, the Germans *expanded* their empire into large parts of Europe. Biondo's *Italia Illustrata* and Celtis' projected *Germania Illustrata* had a common purpose: to stimulate

69 Visitors to Maximilian's cenotaph in the Hofkirche Innsbruck might be surprised to see Arthur and Theodoric among his ancestors. Theodoric had a venerable tradition as the "German" who conquered the Roman empire. The medieval legend of Dietrich von Bern was easily blended with this historical background. Theodoric anticipated the Translation to Charlemagne. See Cochlaeus, *Brevis Germanie*, Bk 2, par 7, 54; Irenicus, *Germania*, Bk 3, 59r-60v (chart); Borchardt, *German Antiquity*, 133, 145, 156, 160, 187.

70 Maximilian is the prototype Christian sovereign whose mission is to defend the faith everywhere. This special task derives from the translatio to Charlemagne and the Germans. Papal approval of this act is indicated by the papal approbation. The faith of the Germans merited this honor. See Bebel, "Quod imperator Romanorum," *Patriotische*, 172-79, and note 45 above.

71 Strauss, *Manifestations of Discontent*, 18.

patriotic passion.⁷² Bebel realized that the imperial claim to universal sovereignty would not have seemed so bizarre, since such assertions go back at least to the Staufer kings.

Bebel is a fierce critic of those German princes who refuse to aid Maximilian in his wars against Venice, Milan, the Low Countries, and Switzerland. Indeed in 1501 when Bebel gave his speech at Innsbruck, the emperor had just lost the Swiss cantons in the Swabian War. Bebel reminds the Swiss that they are “Germans” and their historic place is in the empire. They must assist the *imperator* in the imminent offensive against the Turks.⁷³ While Bebel probably viewed the Burgundian possessions as a lost cause, he was vehement in his calls for imperial intervention in northern Italy. In sum, Bebel envisions the current empire as the latter day Germania, which evolved separately from the ancient Roman empire. (Bebel seems unsure if the latter continues in some sense in the Byzantine empire.) Classical culture remains one of humankind’s treasures. But the renowned Roman culture is about to be surpassed by the fast-evolving civilization of the Germans. (The Humanists anticipated Edward Gibbon’s contrast between the lethargic Romans and the vigorous Germans.) Bebel went beyond Tacitus’ *Germania* in his praise of the Germans, even to the point of producing a vast collection of German proverbs which illustrated the folk-wisdom (and oral side of German traditions) of their ancestors.⁷⁴

Thus Bebel exceeds Celtis’ notion of an indigenous Germania with its virtuous inhabitants by infusing the far-flung “empire” with a common purpose: the defense of Christendom. It is imperative to restore the integrity of the German nucleus of the Holy Roman Empire and the authority of the emperor. The empire continues to assert its claims outside the German nation in Hungary, Poland, and the Habsburg hereditary possessions.

⁷² See Zinsmaier, “Dichterlorbeer und Eichenlaub,” *Patriotische Schriften*, 219-46 at 227-34.

⁷³ See *Cohortatio ad Helvetios pro oboedientia imperii*, Zinsmaier, *Patriotische*, 148-69; *Epitome laudum Suevorum atque principis nostri Udalrici* (on the Swiss Wars), *Patriotische*, 88-135; *Ad Bernenses Thuricenses ceterasque civitates imperiales apud Helvetios*, CAMENA online, 115-29.

⁷⁴ See Bebel’s statement of purpose in W. Suringar, ed. *Heinrich Bebel’s Proverbia Germanica* (Leiden: Brill, 1879; many reprints), 3-7. Even German peasants have good sense (proverb 383). Many kings have been heroes (proverb 386: *calleet historias, regumque heroica gesta*).

Franciscus Irenicus, renowned for his polemical exchange with Lutherans, is more explicit about the German empire. The Roman emperors proceed in a line from Julius Caesar to Maximilian I. Going beyond the migration theories of Bebel, Irenicus would have the *Germani* leaving ancient Germania in large numbers and settling in virtually every region of Europe. They owed almost nothing to ancient Rome. Quite the contrary, they brought virtue and culture to the waning Roman empire. Without denying the immense contribution of Roman and Greek literature, Irenicus rewrites the history of Europe as the Germanization of the West, with the Holy Roman Empire (usually called simply the *imperium*) at its center. The empire of Charlemagne is unequivocally German, and has remained so, even with the acquisitions of later territories, such as Austria.⁷⁵ More precisely, the pope by divine grace acknowledged the higher virtue of the Germans by crowning Charlemagne emperor. Afterwards the eastern half of the empire, previously Germania Magna, was widely accepted as the heart of the German empire. The key to Irenicus' radical vision of German history lies in his concepts of translation and election.

The Roman empire was translated to the Germans in 800. Thus the *imperium* was "transferred," that is, taken from one people and given to another, to the Germans, not to the person of Charles the Great.⁷⁶ (Irenicus is not consistent as to the ethnicity of Charlemagne, and whether he is the first German emperor.) Thus this transfer is an event in the progression of world empires, from the Assyrians to the Romans.⁷⁷ Medieval versions of the world empires stemmed from Orosius and Jerome among others. But the papal coronation of Charles was merely a sign of the exceptional nature of German virtue. The legal transfer came later when a German pope,

⁷⁵ Irenicus, *Germania*, 67v-69r.

⁷⁶ Irenicus, *Germania*, 66v-69r.

⁷⁷ Irenicus, *Germania*, 66r.

Gregory V (996-99), gave Otto III the right to permit his successors to be elected by the princes.⁷⁸ Oddly this bizarre tradition of the papal origin of the German electors was generally accepted by both papalists and imperialists for the next 400 years.⁷⁹ Thus the election—fixed in 1257 at seven designated electors—became the uniquely German way of passing on the empire. Otto III (or Otto I) was the first emperor of the Germans. The *imperium* is and always will be German. Hence today Maximilian I is the emperor of the Germans and not king of the Romans.⁸⁰ Germany is nothing less than the ancient Germania Magna with expanded borders over the centuries. Irenicus turns Tacitus on his head: Roman Germania is the focal point of the German empire which spilled over into the Roman empire.

Other Humanists adopt Irenicus' conception of the German empire as an alter-Roman empire. Johannes Cochlaeus (1479-1552), from a village near Nuremberg, was a defender of Catholic doctrine against Luther and the Hussites. He builds on Tacitus' *Germania* to evoke an extended German empire, mixed with descriptions in the style of the *Italia Illustrata*. Cochlaeus attempts to describe the borders of Germany, with minute descriptions of towns and regions. Integrated with this geography are notes about the cultural achievements of the Germans, such as inventions (printing press, cannon,)⁸¹ and art (Dürer among others).⁸² No nation or region can come close to their cultural heights.⁸³ Austria was part of the Roman empire, while

78 Irenicus, *Germania*, 69r. See Wimpfeling, *Epitome*, Chaps. 20-1, 17v-19r.; S. Franck, *Germaniae Chronicon*, 102r.

79 See Langhans, *Die Fabel von der Einsetzung des Kurfürstencollegiums*.

80 Irenicus, *Germania*, 69v: ad Maximilianum Germanorum imperatorem... Maximilianum Germanorum imperatorem non Romanorum. In retaliation for being addressed by Pope Gregory VII as a mere king of the "Germans," Henry IV boasted he was in fact king of the "Romans," a more universalist title giving him claim to Italy and some control of spiritual affairs.

81 Cochlaeus, *Brevis Germanie Descriptio* (1512), Chap. 3, pars. 1-5.

82 *Brevis*, Chap. 4, par 30, 88-92.

83 See *Brevis*, *Peroratio in Germaniam*, 162-65.

Hungary was formerly lower Pannonia. Maximilian I is descended from the Roman emperors, “always Augustus.”⁸⁴ The regions of Germany (*Germanice regiones*) form part of the *Germania Illustrata* of Conrad Celtis. These descriptions are based on the writings of classical geographers.⁸⁵ The empire is *nostrae Germanie*.⁸⁶

In his extensive writings about Germany Jacob Wimpheling likewise stresses the centrality of the Translation of Empire to Charlemagne. Pope Leo III recognized the legitimacy of Charlemagne’s conquests when he crowned him emperor with the acclamation of the Roman people. Sometime in the past, the empire (*Romanum imperium*) was translated to the Germans from the Greeks. In Wimpheling’s garbled account of the translation he designates the eastern Germans (Frank-Germans) as the Germany which traces its history back to the time of Tacitus. Maximilian I is the emperor of the Germans, who long before had expanded south and west. Following Irenicus and the medieval tradition, Wimpheling acknowledges Pope Gregory V’s gift of the principle of election at the time of Otto III. The electors are the “Roman people,” who represent the entire Roman empire. The empire was translated to the Germans “in Germany,” which includes Alsace, the author’s sub-theme in his treatise. Post-Charlemagne Germany is a nation and an empire. Wimpheling assures his German readers, especially the princes, that Maximilian I in his wars in Italy is simply following the historical policy of his imperial ancestors since the time of Charlemagne. He implies that the German empire was originally the Frankish empire and part of the (extra-Roman) empire of Karolus Magnus. But after the empire was transferred to him and the “German Franks” the eastern half (Germany) became the pivot of the new empire of the Germans. Alsace was always part of the German half. The “French” remain *de iure* subject to the German empire.

84 *Brevis*, Chap. 6, par 11, 116; also Chap. 5, par 11; Chap. 8, par 24.

85 *Peroratio*, 162-64.

86 *Johanni Cocleo Norico Schole Laurentiane, Brevis*, 166. For Cochlaeus’ nationalism, see Bagchi, “*Teuschlandt über alle Welt*,” 37-53.

This motif of the far-reaching German empire in the east is developed at length in Wimpfeling's *Epitome*. For our purposes here, the main point is that Charlemagne's Frankish empire is German not Roman, and never was Roman. The German empire is the continuation of the Germania Magna of the first century, and expanded under Pepin, Charlemagne, and Louis the Pious.⁸⁷ Many emperors since Claudius were Germans, from the "German" areas overrun by the Germanic tribes which migrated out of Germania. When the emperor moved to Constantinople, the empire was translated to the Germans, with some connection to the coronation of Charlemagne. The German empire includes the ancient Roman Germania Superior and Germania Inferior. The emperors of Germania and its expanded borders continue down to Maximilian I.⁸⁸ Wimpfeling's description of the physical borders of Germania at the time of Charlemagne is not precise, and not always clearly connected to "Germanic" Italy and Gaul. He strains to make links between Charlemagne and the German Ottonians and Staufer. Wimpfeling's outline of German history after Charlemagne is less a political narrative than a series of themes: the Roman empire passed to the Germans legally and as part of God's plan; the German empire was *de facto* an empire before the coronation of 800; the German emperors trace their descent back to the first Roman emperors; German emperors rule essentially the same empire with the same German essence (Germania); Gaul and Italy are part of the German empire, even if at times only *de iure*; Innocent III's translation confirmed the translation to Charlemagne; Germania is both an empire and a nation; the emperor represents the entire German people.

Sebastian Franck (1499-1543), from Donauworth in Bavaria, in his *German Chronicle* (1538) Charlemagne was the first German emperor, who received the empire—which was called Germania—

87 Wimpfeling, *Epitome rerum Germanicarum* (1562), esp. Chaps. 10-11, 18, 20-2. Another copy in Schardius, *Rerum Germanicarum Scriptores Varii* (Giessae, 1673), vol. 1, 170-99.

88 *Epitome*, Chap. 9 [misprinted as 10 in 1562 ed.], 10r-11v. Wimpfeling strongly denies that the imperial title derived from the ancient Gauls. Early Germania expanded across the Rhine to the Vosges, which forms a sort of boundary between France and Germany. See Dickens, *The German Nation and Martin Luther*, Chap. 2 ("Humanism and the National Myth").

from the Greeks.⁸⁹ After this translation he was no longer king of the Franks but the king of Gaul and Germany. The basis of his new empire is Germany, as others testify (Wimpheling, Lupold of Bebenburg, Irenicus, Otto of Freising).⁹⁰ The western Franks may belong to the empire, but the center is Germany, from where some Germans, such as the Lombards, emigrated to Italy.

The tendency of the German Humanists to designate the Holy Roman Empire as German was hardly an innovation. The later Middle Ages witnessed apocalyptic prophecies which portray the empire as distinctly *German*, even to the point of being anti-Latin. Modern historians of the German nation often pay little attention to this prophetic tradition with its widespread dissemination of prophecies about the German empire. One of the most popular was the Gamaleon letter (c.1400) which foretells of an imminent upheaval in Europe, ending with the victory of the Germans just before the End Times.⁹¹ The “German” empire will seize all church property and overthrow the supreme pontiff. There will be a clash between the Romance powers and the German rulers, culminating with the triumph of the Last World Emperor.

The letter of Brother Sigwald foresees the citizens of Nuremberg leading the purification of the Germans. The popular Eve of Ascension (late 14th century) prophecy foretells of the destruction of the Roman clergy and the renewal of the entire church brought about by the German empire.⁹² The catalyst for this transformation

89 Franck, *Germaniae Chronicon* (1518), 81r-83r. “Also ist in der person Caroli das reich vonn Griechen an die Teutschen in Germaniam gewendt,” 81r.

90 Irenicus, *Germaniae*, 82r, *passim*. Good analysis of the invasions in Franck in Ridé, *L'image*, vol. 2, 819-66 at 833-47.

91 See Kneupper, *Empire*, Chap. 2, esp. 52-61. In some versions the German emperor will destroy the Roman empire and its descendants, including the Roman pope. See Dickens, *German Nation*, Chap. 1.

92 Kneupper, *Empire*, Chap. 3. See Lerner, “Medieval Prophecy and Religious Dissent,” 3-24. These prophecies give a special role to imperial Nürnberg.

of Christian Europe would be the German people. The “Welsch Lands” (Romance language Europe) are set against the German Lands.⁹³ The *Auffahrt Abend* prophecy is sharply anticlerical and anti-papal. Many of these prophecies were translated into German for faster distribution.⁹⁴ The “Foolishness of the Welsch” and similar prophecies contrast the corrupt Latins and greedy popes with the virtuous Germans. The emperor is often portrayed as fully German and less Roman and universalist.⁹⁵ The empire is emphatically German. The German empire will destroy the Roman “emperor” (the pope). The German empire is elective, that identifying quality which sets it apart from other sovereigns.

The German Humanists generally had little taste for these millenarian prophecies, but many of their patriotic renderings appear in these popular predictions of the late Middle Ages. Like the prophecies, the Humanists are interested in the Germanness of the emperor and the empire; the empire as the leader in church reform; the emperor as head of a crusade to liberate Christendom from the Turks; the radical differences between the German and Roman empires; the role of the German *Volk* in the mission of the empire; the increasing importance of the German aspects of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation; the contrast between Romantic and Germanic languages; and the use of apocalyptic attacks and counter-thrusts by Catholic and Lutheran polemicists starting in the 1520s. While we cannot be sure if these prophecies directly influenced the Humanists, we can say at the least that Humanism and prophecy emerged from the same cultural milieu. It might be noted that even when the unity

93 Kneupper, *Empire*, 157-67.

94 Kneupper, *Empire*, Chap. 4.

95 Kneupper, *Empire*, Chap. 7 (“German Identity in Prophetic Thought”). As do many of these late medieval prophecies, the *Gallorum levitas* dwells on the uniqueness of the German constitution, particularly the princely election of the king.

of the empire came under increased stress with the arrival of the Lutheran Reformation and the Valois-Habsburg wars, many of the Humanists, from both northern and southern Germany, continued to emphasize the German essence of the empire.

Conclusion

Almost from the beginning of the Humanist movement in Germany after 1450, there was a decidedly patriotic component in the way the Humanists wrote about Germany, however Germany was defined. In part, the impetus for this thrust was the determination to refute the negative depictions of Germans, both ancient and modern, by the Italian Humanists, beginning with Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini. (The stereotype of the German Fury is evident since at least the twelfth century.) The Italians challenged the Germans to show that the latter can do more than just fight; that they had a worthy past; that they had produced many writers who recorded their history along with their other cultural accomplishments; that they had a distinct identity, which can be traced back to the ancient sources, particularly those of Tacitus. The initial response of the Germans was to affirm, somewhat defensively, that they loved the Greco-Roman classics just as much as did the Italians. Thus the first parry was to limit the discussion to a literary plane, in the manner of a war of words. Few Germans at first showed much interest in this academic quarrel.

By the 1490s, however, the German counterattack was taking on a patriotic veneer. The negative (reply to the Italians) was becoming more positive (assert German worthiness for its own sake). The patriotic tone of the German Humanists became louder. They searched ancient and medieval sources for information about their former greatness. More to the point, they sought practical applications of their learned studies to immediate circumstances. The problems of the empire under Maximilian I compelled them to clarify the relevance of their literary pursuits to political realities, often using Tacitus' *Germania* as their model. The turmoil of the 1490s threatened the unity and the very existence of Germany: the

invasion of the French in 1494, the loss of some of the Burgundian and Netherlands inheritance, the reforms debated at the Reichstags of 1495-1498, the Swabian Wars and the Swiss breakaway, wars in eastern Europe and the Turkish advances, conflicts involving Venice and Milan, and disputes in Tyrol and Bavaria. The Humanists placed their hopes in the emperor, who could still promote powerful images of an illustrious Roman and Germanic past. Increasingly the German Humanists focus on the German core of the Holy Roman Empire. Their terminology reflects this obsession with German history, as in their preference for the name Deutschland in lieu of the traditional German Lands, Alemmania, Teutonia, and their variants. While they continue to view Germanness as a common loyalty to the empire and the emperor, the Humanists place more emphasis on the German heartland, with its advanced culture, varied topography, and geographical beauty. In the early days of the humanistic movement they felt they had to counter Tacitus' derogatory remarks about the terrain and climate: no wonder the Germans are indigenous! Who would want to settle in a land so desolate and frigid? Over time the Humanists learned to ignore such comments and concentrate instead on the praiseworthy aspects of Tacitus' Germans, especially their virtues of courage, loyalty, and love of freedom. They came to view German history and civilization as equal and even superior to ancient Rome and contemporary Italy.

Modern historians of German Humanism have not neglected the tendency to identify the Holy Roman Empire with the German *nation*, a term used after 1490 with increasing frequency. So too the attachment to the idea of the Roman empire with its universalism has been much discussed in recent scholarship. Certainly Maximilian I never stopped promoting his ties with the ancient Roman empire and the Roman line of emperors, whom he considered his ancestors. Maximilian's Triumphal Arch woodcut and his cenotaph in Innsbruck abound in imperial themes, both Roman and Germanic. Although an Austrian Habsburg, he often referred to himself as German. Both Maximilian and the German Humanists realized the need for an ideological narrative that affirmed the empire's need to counter the threats of the powerful neighbor to the west (France) and to the east (the Ottoman Empire).

Yet modern scholars may have underappreciated the German Humanists' vision of the Holy Roman Empire as itself German. Some of this misunderstanding, it is suggested here, lies in the concept of the Translation of Empire, that staple of German political theory since at least the time of Frederick Barbarossa. We may be taking the Humanists too literally when we assume that the Roman empire was transferred to the Germans on Christmas, 800. Certainly many of the Humanists place the *translatio* in the context of the patristic notion of the progression of the world empires (usually four prior to the Germans). It is significant that the Humanists display a strange ambivalence about the person of Charlemagne, who after all was the occasion of the Translation. Granted that medieval German writers about the empire did not always give the honor to Charlemagne, with Otto I and Otto III being other choices. Yet the Humanists, for all their fascination with the German heritage of Charlemagne, were divided as to whether or not the honor of the Translation should go to him. The reason for this hesitancy, we submit, is because the Humanists want it both ways: the Roman empire was translated to Charlemagne, but in another sense he already held an empire. This empire, by whatever name, was essentially in eastern Europe, a descendent of the Roman Germania Magna. It was not (usually) the kingdom of the Franks, since the tribes in the eastern part were "Germans." Nor did it derive from the Gauls, as the French sometimes claimed. The Humanists' description of the period of Charlemagne and his successors is varied and often ambiguous.

The reason is simple: they strive to make the Carolingian empire a continuation of Tacitus' Germania, yet without abandoning its historical ties to the universal Roman empire! This attempt to square the circle runs through much of German polemical writings in the era after the Staufer in the thirteenth century. (Witness Lupold of Bebenberg's views of Germany with the "additions" of Burgundy and Italy as constituting the empire.) The Humanists want the empire to be thoroughly German, yet with a history which precedes Charlemagne and even Constantine. Indeed, Germany is *pre-Roman*! Germany's unparalleled pedigree makes the Romans/Italians and the French look like neophytes! While the *translatio imperii* may have been made to a king (Charlemagne), it was more importantly

made to a *people* (Germans). They imply that Charlemagne was *already* an emperor, if only *de facto*, when Pope Leo crowned him on Christmas Day. The Germans deserved the empire by reason of their virtue, a traditional argument going back at least to Alexander of Roes.

Obviously the Humanists' notion of Charlemagne's empire as Germania involves some fabrication of their historical sources, and clinging to some medieval myths. In fairness to the Humanists they may have been unaware of the biases and distortions in the chronicle sources they rely upon and rarely question. In their explanations of the *translatio imperii* they took advantage of the ambiguity of the word *imperium*, which could mean authority or command as well as the usual land empire. (The great sea empires of the sixteenth centuries were just emerging.) The Humanists in effect rationalized the Germans' possession of the empire more as a reward for their virtue and their long *de facto* possession than by any legal transfer of power, by no less than a pope. In effect, nothing of substance was transferred in 800 (or 962).

The German Humanists of course recognized the translation of the Roman empire to the Germans, and indeed took pride in the event. After all, the *translatio imperii* showed that the Germans had divine approval, and took the empire away from the Romans and their present hapless descendants, the Italians. And, as some eschatological forecasters would have it, this empire is the final world empire. What the German Humanists insist on is that the German essence of the post-Roman empire far surpasses the Romanness of the *imperium*. The German empire is an alternative Roman empire and always has been. It was, if you will, a parallel empire, and now expanding in power and cultural glory as never before. The German mission is Christian; the pagan Roman mission, such as it was, was world conquest and selfish ambition. The German absorbed what was left of the Roman, and is now flourishing.

In the context of the 1520s the Germans often associated the Roman empire with papal Rome, which exploited the German church. Even for those Humanists, such as Wimpheling, who remained Catholic, the papal curia was the enemy. Yet even after

1530 Catholic and Lutheran Humanists could not cease extolling the German empire, now as fractured as ever. Charles V may not have considered his world empire “German,” but the German Humanists would not abandon the German or Germanic *imperium*.

Napoleon got it right. He was emperor of the *French*. From now on, subject peoples would be “French” in the sense that they acknowledged the New Charlemagne as their overlord. Maximilian I got it half right, in the eyes of the German Humanists. He was the emperor of the German Nation. But he was also emperor of the Germans in the sense that the *imperium* was itself German. Caesar Augustus’ capital was Rome. Napoleon’s was Paris. But Maximilian’s “capital” was the German People. Germania was and is the “capital” of the Holy Roman Empire! Innsbruck could hardly be called a capital. The Humanists *mutatis mutandis* transposed Tacitus’ Germania into a 1500-year old *imperium deutscher Reich*.

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